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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 000455

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STATE FOR EAP, AND EAP/MTS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR URGES MILF CHIEF TO EMBRACE PEACE,
REJECT TERRORISTS

REF: A. 07 MANILA 3676 (MUSLIM INSURGENT CHAIRMAN
[1](#)B. MALAYSIAN FACILITATOR WELCOME USG SUPPORT

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador met February 19 with the head of the insurgent Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to urge more rapid progress toward peace, an end to support for terrorists, and a clear commitment to stability and prosperity. MILF Chairman Murad Ebrahim warmly welcomed the Ambassador's visit to Camp Darapanan in Mindanao, appreciated U.S. support for the peace process and repeated his request for a U.S. role in supporting the implementation of an agreement, along with other countries (reftel). Along with Malaysian peace talks facilitator Datuk Othman, who accompanied the Ambassador and DCM on a flight from Manila, Murad professed a strong commitment to peace and acknowledged that terrorists "take advantage of us." Murad predicted that a peace accord was within reach this year, and asserted that the MILF was firmly united behind him and that he was reaching out to the rival Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Both Murad and Othman acknowledged progress on the peace talks, which had moved beyond territorial issues to governance, but voiced concern that ongoing political controversies could sidetrack the Arroyo administration. Datuk Othman also noted his good ties with Embassy Kuala Lumpur, praising post's efforts in support of the peace process. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) This first meeting for a U.S. ambassador with the MILF leadership took place at the group's headquarters outside Cotabato. The MILF marked the visit with considerable ceremony, including an honor guard, cavalry display, cultural show, dancing and flowers. Chairman Murad warmly welcomed the visit, saying that there were some 3,000 people in the camp, and all of them wanted to meet the Ambassador. The meeting also drew extensive coverage from the Manila-based national press, who were invited by the MILF.

TIME FOR PEACE

[1](#)3. (C) The dialogue began with a restricted meeting that included MILF Chairman Murad, Malaysian facilitator Datuk Othman, the Ambassador and DCM. Murad stressed his view that now was the moment to move forward on the Mindanao peace process, especially in light of the ARMM elections slated for summer 2008, as well as the 2010 presidential vote. On a hopeful note, Murad forecast that a full peace agreement with the government was possible this year, and stated that the MILF was united behind him, not factionalized as some claimed. Moreover, he was reaching out to the rival Moro

National Liberation Front (MNLF) as well in an effort to draw the two groups together. Still, he considered it essential to demonstrate continued progress in order to keep both his own followers and the government committed to the peace process. Noting that he was growing old, Murad emphasized that this commitment to peace grew out of a personal sense of duty, not a desire for personal benefit in a new political entity for the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Murad asked for the USG's sense of the Philippine government's commitment to the peace process.

TERRORISTS TAKE ADVANTAGE OF MILF

14. (C) The Ambassador voiced appreciation for the opportunity to discuss these vital issues, and agreed with Murad on the importance of moving rapidly to conclude a peace deal. But more than just concluding the deal, it was equally important to ensure that implementation of the peace accord was successful. Much was at stake, and improving the prosperity of Mindanao depended on improving security in the region. The MILF had a major role in this, not least in denying sanctuary and transit to terrorists. These extremists were no friends of Mindanao in achieving peace or prosperity. As Murad acknowledged that "the terrorists take advantage of us," the Ambassador pressed the point, stating terrorists used MILF areas for harbor and transit. It was vital for the MILF to work with the Philippine government and the international community to clear up this terrorist threat. The MILF had important information that could help alleviate this serious problem, and the USG would welcome discussions on this and other points with MILF representatives. Progress on eliminating terrorists would be extremely helpful in

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moving toward peace.

MANILA DISTRACTED BY POLITICS?

15. (C) Malaysian facilitator Othman opined that progress on terrorism would come with progress in the peace talks. Murad concurred, emphasizing again the need for real progress with the government. Peace was a victory for all sides, and all would benefit, but Murad wondered whether the Arroyo administration could focus on the peace process given the many political problems it faced in Manila. The administration was not strong, especially with presidential elections in two years' time. Nonetheless, Murad went on to say it was important to have an international presence to help implement a peace accord, and said he would welcome views in future on what role the U.S. could play in supporting implementation of an agreement, along with other key countries.

16. (C) The Ambassador acknowledged that President Arroyo certainly faced distractions on the political front, but was clearly determined to push through with an enduring peace accord. And from a purely pragmatic view, pulling off a peace agreement would mark a major success for her presidential agenda. Chairman Murad voiced strong agreement, saying that a peace deal would represent a "win-win" situation for the government and MILF.

TALKS SHOW PROGRESS, BUT HURDLES REMAIN

17. (C) Despite the concerns about Manila, both Murad and Othman noted progress in the peace talks. The negotiations used to focus on questions regarding territory but had now moved on, with the most recent January 31-February 1 session in Kuala Lumpur dealing with the admittedly more difficult issues of governance. The sides were grappling with the

"difficult but workable" constitutional issues, such as "ownership" of resources vs. "control." Still, the two complained that the government often sought to craft language that included escape clauses that allowed the government to overrule a section if it was in the public interest, but without specifically defining the public interest.

DEVELOPMENT AID KEY TO WINNING PEACE

¶8. (C) Issues of livelihood and assistance were clearly on the minds of both Murad and Othman, with the Malaysian suggesting additional development assistance would be vital in cementing a peace deal. In particular, livelihood training needed to start even before the deal was signed, Othman suggested, to give insurgents some alternative to fighting. Training and aid also needed to be spread widely, so no one region or group grew jealous. Big business interests were another sticking point, according to Othman, both because businesses controlled so much land and because they were reluctant to turn over a percentage of profits to the Bangsamoro. The Ambassador stressed the need for care on this, as business was vital to development and driving away business could have profound consequences.

¶9. (C) For our part, the Ambassador said, the Embassy seeks to develop further our contacts at all levels with the MILF to enhance transparency and understanding. The contacts should not just be among the top leadership but also among MILF central committee members and the broader country team. Murad welcomed this, and said that his lieutenants would be in contact soon.

¶10. (C) In an aside, Othman remarked on the high value he placed on his relationship with U.S. Embassy Kuala Lumpur. He said he had a good dialogue with the Embassy, which was emblematic of the important role the U.S. played in the talks.

ALLAYING FEARS ON BALIKATAN

¶11. (C) The group then moved to an expanded meeting where Murad introduced some 15 members of the MILF Central Committee and the Ambassador introduced USAID Mission

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Director, JSOTF-P Commander and U.S. Navy Attache, who accompanied her. In the larger meeting, the Ambassador reaffirmed our commitment to peace and offered more contact with the MILF at all levels. On the margins, members of the U.S. side clarified misconceptions about the ongoing Balikatan exercises and explained that only humanitarian activities were planned for Mindanao. The U.S. side also discussed U.S. development assistance in Mindanao and the upcoming visit of the USNS Mercy.

AMBASSADOR MEETS OTHER MUSLIM LEADERS

¶12. (C) During the trip to Mindanao, the Ambassador also met with Cotabato Mayor Sema, who was a long-time acquaintance of Chairman Murad, having attended high school and served in the MNLF together in years past. While ARMM Governor Zaldy Ampatuan, scion of the powerful clan that dominates Mindanao politics, was away on travel February 19, the Ambassador met with him and his chief advisors at the Embassy in Manila February 20. During the cordial meeting, Ampatuan emphasized his support for the peace process but also called for increased assistance, preferably directed to his ARMM development office. The Governor also voiced concern over the lack of coordination by the Philippine government and armed forces in the runup to the Balikatan exercises, but

welcomed the Embassy's outreach efforts to explain the humanitarian nature of the Mindanao exercises. Ampatuan was also enthusiastic at the prospect of having the hospital ship Mercy visit his region in the coming months.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) The MILF were clearly excited to have us visit and eager to be on their best behavior. They viewed this as a step forward in our continuing contacts with them.
KENNEY